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Urban monk works to see 'the church we dream of'

Tom Roberts | Nov. 1, 2010

Shane Claiborne (Photos by Erik Stenbakken)

26th in a series

PHILADELPHIA -- Reporting on the ?emerging church? is a slippery matter, somewhat like reviewing a partially written play, or judging a meal by reading recipes.

It is one thing to understand that something new is under way, if only because outside forces make change inevitable in both the Catholic and evangelical Protestant worlds. It is quite another thing to understand what those two words, emerging church, might mean in real circumstances.

Perhaps the need to pin something down, to give form, however incomplete, to such an outsized idea, is why Shane Claiborne has become a highly visible sign of what many call the emerging church, or more audaciously, emerging Christianity. Claiborne himself prefers identifying with a movement that is a kind of subset of emerging Christianity, called ?the new monasticism.?

Even that is an inadequate description. Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr describes him as ?a third way kind of person.? The Catholic nonviolence community might just call him a Catholic Worker by any other name. Kids in his neighborhood might talk about how awesome he is at juggling and riding a really tall unicycle.

The danger is in the temptation to overstate a case based on an individual who?s only 35 years old and whose home is a nondenominational community with a core of about a dozen people in one of the more derelict areas of North Philadelphia.

That locus is as good a place as any to begin. It is difficult to question the religious conviction of this young evangelical who, while having an earning capacity that must go well into six figures, limits himself to an $800-a-month stipend and takes up residence in a place haunted by poverty and violence.

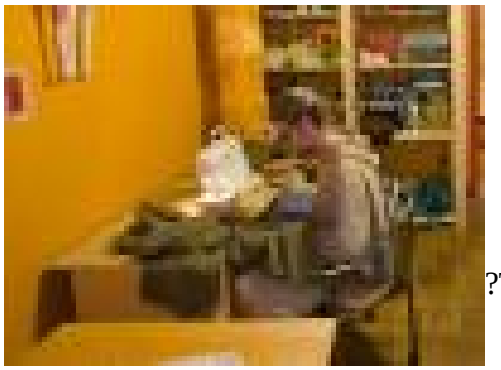
When I visited Claiborne?s community, The Simple Way, in mid-August, two men were injured in a shooting one night across the street from the house where I was staying. By noon the next day, women and youngsters were walking over the bloodstains on the sidewalk, the yellow crime scene tape little-noticed. Shootings are too

numerous here to shock residents of the Kensington and Allegheny neighborhood.

The story of how Claiborne came to live amid what the young monastics call the 21st century?s desert goes far in explaining why he symbolizes the connections evangelicals are making with wellsprings of Catholic spirituality and practice. People like Claiborne and his community have taken up consideration of the mystics, the monastic tradition, the Catholic social justice tradition, and even certain liturgical elements while maintaining at best a loose connection to institutional church. Claiborne said the community is not an attempt to form a new denomination, and members worship at existing churches in the area.

The final test of faith

?I?m not sure how we miss it, this idea that activism and our spirituality have to go together. You would just look at Jesus? final account of Judgment in Matthew 25, where all of us are gathered before God, and the final test of our faith is how we?ve treated our neighbor,? Claiborne said earlier this year at a conference on Emerging Christianity sponsored by Rohr?s Center for Action and Contemplation. ?It?s not that God is going to give us a doctrinal test like, ?Okay, virgin birth: agree, disagree or strongly disagree??



?The questions that were asked were things like, ?When I was in jail, did you visit me? When I was hungry, did you feed me?? That?s the faith that I?ve come to know, and yet, I think where it began for me was getting outside of the environment that I grew up in. ... For me, activism and even a vital prayer life began with the theology of place, of moving away from this pattern of insulating ourselves from suffering.?

He began to get close to that suffering after he moved from Tennessee to study at Eastern University, a Christian school just outside of Philadelphia, where one of the greatest influences on his thinking was sociologist and theologian Tony Campolo.

?He was one of the most articulate students I?ve ever had,? said Campolo. ?He?s become an icon; young people flock to him wherever he goes.? Claiborne?s popularity, Campolo believes, shows that ?young people are looking for a radical form of Christianity, not religiosity.?

Claiborne says the community has ?tons of non-Christians and anarchists? and people who may be living together and not married volunteer at The Simple Way. They aren?t turned away, but it is also understood they couldn?t be full members because of all the ?collisions? with matters important to the core of the community.

What about culture war issues such as homosexuality and abortion?

?We?re careful not to get hijacked by those but to recognize that these are real issues. They?re not ideologies to us.? A 14-year-old in the neighborhood became pregnant and the question for the community, he said, was how to help care for her and her baby. Another community member has adopted some children from the neighborhood, he said. ?To be pro-life means you adopt kids sometimes.?

He recalled a meeting in North Carolina in 2004 with about 100 people from a range of communities -- from the

Bruderhof to evangelicals to Catholic Workers -- that gave birth to the new monasticism. Claiborne was helping to moderate a conversation on sexuality. ?It was a nightmare, but it was really interesting. So we said that what we could agree on was we want to support monogamous, married couples and their children and celibate singles?

He said the statement did not attach gender to the monogamous couples. ?The different communities would resolve that in different ways. I?m not a pastor so it doesn?t come out that people would ask me to marry them in a same-gender relationship. Personally, I would not be able to do that if I were a pastor, but I also don?t have any shame in saying, ?I?ve got a pastor friend who would love to marry you.? ?

He said he considered his view an example of the non-dualistic thinking that Rohr speaks about. ?This is how I feel and I?m unapologetic about that, but there may be more than what I see.? Claiborne more than once makes the point that he and other young monastics don?t claim to have all the answers and deeply distrust those who make that claim.

Ironically, given his high regard for some things Catholic, one of Claiborne?s first exposures to the suffering in North Philadelphia occurred in 1995 when he was at college and the Philadelphia archdiocese sent eviction notices to homeless people who had taken up refuge in a church the archdiocese had closed. As Claiborne tells the story, he and a group of students ?began to see that we?ve got to pray for this situation, but we?ve also got to do something. I began to see that prayer in our Christian subculture had become a way that we could get ourselves excused from any action.?

So they joined with the families and learned from the homeless the power of organizing and of prayer and community. ?There was really a moment in that church,? he said, ?when we began to say we?re going to stop complaining about the church we?ve experienced and start working on becoming the church we dream of.? Claiborne has been in North Philadelphia since.

Church in Claiborne?s world can mean the local community, a core of people attached in varying degrees of intensity, theological agreement and commitment to the core?s vision as well as to other layers of followers and supporters. The image Claiborne uses to explain the structure is an onion.

The different layers have accomplished a fair amount of redemption in a small wedge of bleak urban landscape. The community now owns about 10 homes, helps neighbors rehab others, runs a lunch program once a week with donated food, and holds summer camps for neighborhood children.

However countercultural the life may be, Claiborne lives in a society in which celebrity approaches idolatry, even if (perhaps especially if) the celebrity is a religious figure. Claiborne, with his signature dreadlocks and bandana, a skinny-as-six-o?clock frame draped in baggy pants and a T-shirt, has become a celebrity in some circles. This urban monk -- single and funny, with the twangy delivery and timing (if not the content) of a Jeff Foxworthy -- is flooded with invitations to speak. The road and the adulation of devotees has been the undoing of many a famous persona.

He knows he needs to protect himself. He uses a committee of close friends, including Campolo, to decide which invitations he should take. He limits himself to 10 days a month on the road, which means he is able to say yes to only a quarter of the requests. He almost always travels with a companion and asks to stay with a household rather than at a hotel.

He says he can imagine himself marrying at some point (he?s currently dating someone) but will remain celibate until then. His experience leads him to conclude that society undervalues the single state and what one might accomplish during those years when so much pressure is placed on young people ?to find someone.?

Not only is it unnecessary pressure, he said, ?it?s a bad theology, too. I think that a better way of understanding it is to really celebrate the gift that singleness has been to the church and see that it might be a really great option for a season or for a lifetime. I look at Mother Teresa and I don?t go, ?Poor thing. If she?d only met her husband.? ?

At home he says morning prayer daily with several members of the community, and he does an evening prayer alone. Decisions to write books or produce videos are made in consultation with others. An advisory board helps the community to keep business dealings transparent.

A nonnegotiable

Nonviolence is one of the nonnegotiables for Claiborne, and one of the beliefs that illustrate the distance between his life today and his East Tennessee upbringing. ?My dad was in Vietnam. My family is Deep South and hillbillies. They are incredible folks, but also a lot of racism and God and country,? he said. His time at Eastern and under the tutelage of Campolo began to change his thinking. ?I was hearing in the classroom challenges to imperialism, militarism and materialism, but it was also coming to life on the streets.?

In the North Philadelphia community ?we saw kids shooting each other and things like that. I think it was a perfect storm in a lot of ways. What I was reading, I was seeing on the streets.?

Claiborne told of some experiences he?s had with violence in the neighborhood. The only time he was attacked was a case of mistaken identity, when someone assaulted him from behind after he had cut his abundant dreadlocks for a trip to Iraq in 2003. And the only time he?s had a gun pulled on him was when a cop saw him weeding one of the pocket gardens that the community has planted throughout the neighborhood. Claiborne was using a machete.

But more than once there?s been a street disturbance, a fight brewing with a crowd just outside his door. ?We?ll just start juggling fire at the other end of the block or create a circus of distraction.? He went to circus school prior to taking up life at the margins. His circus paraphernalia -- a 6-foot unicycle, torches, pins and machetes for juggling -- hang on the wall in the living room of his renovated row house.

?You create a distraction. It?s like ?Fight, fight, fight ... Whoa! There?s fire and a circus!? ?

Such skill also helps when you?re trying to hold a birthday party for a little girl in Baghdad when the bombs start falling. Claiborne was there with a delegation headed by peace activist Kathy Kelly. The adults were ready to shut the party down, ?and the kids were like, ?No, we?ve got to keep the party going.?

?It was this deep resilient sense that the party has to go on. ... We juggled and I walked on my hands around this big old circle. I think there?s something really powerful in being able to play even in the midst of such crises.?

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

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